

Deacon Pawel Mucha's sermon for the feast of St. Silouan, 24 September 2020

Schema monk Father Silouan. Name "in the world" Simeon Ivanovich Antonov. Peasant from the province of Tambov, district of Lebeyan, village of Shovsk. Born 1866. Professed 1896. Schema 1911. Performed his duties of obedience at the mill at Kalomar, at Old Russikon, and as steward. Died 11/24 September 1938.

That should have been the total record of this Russian peasant monk, a monk of the great Russian monastery of St Panteleimon on Mount Athos which at the time he entered had 2,000 monks. A monastery which was like a large village or a small town with hundreds of pilgrims visiting it each year. Even in the monastery Silouan was a hidden monk living in a small hut near the mill of the monastery. Yet he drew pilgrims to him. A visiting Russian prince was castigated by one of the senior monks who was a member of the abbot's high council with wasting his time with this illiterate peasant. The senior monk did not appreciate being told that this illiterate peasant had a rare wisdom which was far above normal human knowledge or learning.

As a young man he certainly did not show much inclination of becoming a saint. He was a physically strong young man who was somewhat fond of vodka and girls. After his military service he had a dramatic change in his life due to a meeting with the Mother of God. Like St Mary of Egypt who had a similar encounter he totally changed his life and following the advice of St John of Khronstadt he went to the monastery of St Panteleimon.

In the monastery he attacked the monastic life with great fervour. But he quickly realised that fervour and self will was not going to be enough. For 17 years he prayed at night seated on a 3 legged stool with a rope running from one corner of his cell to another. He would pray constantly, his arms looped round the rope, so that when he fell asleep he would not fall off the stool.

In this prayer he struggled with constant attacks of demons. His only consolation was the thought "keep your mind in hell and do not despair". The very phrase that is on his icon before us in this place. Interesting sentence. Back in the days when I used to run the Saturday program here we had groups from a singles club who would come regularly and would ask for a tour of the chapel. Of all the icons it was this one of Silouan with this enigmatic phrase that attracted their attention. Inevitably the question "what does this mean?" would be asked. It always struck me that if you had to ask the question then life was treating you pretty kindly. The guys living on the street who were coming here every day never asked that question. For them living in the hell of the street keeping hope was their struggle. Silouan's phrase was just common sense to them.

As Silouan lay dying in the monastery infirmary a monk asked him, "are you dying Father Silouan?" to which Silouan replied, "I don't know. I haven't learnt yet to be humble." Some of us here will remember Dean who came here almost every day. He was a very quiet man, who incidentally looked quite like Silouan. He said little until one day he opened up and spoke very vividly of what life on the street was really like. Perhaps through the humiliation of street life a deep form of humbleness could be learned. Not hard to imagine Silouan and Dean sitting together and understanding each other. One as quiet as the other but eloquently understanding each other in silence. Each in their own way having lived in hell without despairing.

The memory of the self-important monk of the monastic high council of the Russikon is largely forgotten. Silouan the illiterate peasant monk is known throughout the world as he has become a fisher of men, like the disciples in today's gospel, because he acquired the compassion of God himself through prayer for a suffering world.



St. Silouan of Athos Chapel, located at St. John the Compassionate Mission, Toronto, Canada